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ABSTRACT

Although proponents of "heavy" phonics instruction (intensive, systematic phonics instruction carried out extensively) argue that the literacy gap between minorities and the middle class can be closed by teaching phonics, heavy phonics instruction seems to be a tool for widening rather than closing the literacy gap between non-mainstream and mainstream children. Heavy phonics instruction may also be a tool for reinforcing and perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities. Heavy phonics instruction reflects the assumptions of a transmission model of education, and the hidden curriculum inherent in that model. While members of the political "far right" may not be aware of the typical effects of promoting a heavy emphasis on phonics, such instruction can be a weapon to further oppress those already less advantaged. A vastly disproportionate number of non-mainstream students are assigned to lower reading groups, where both the manner and the content of instruction contrast significantly with that offered in higher reading groups. The manner of instruction in lower reading groups socializes those students for subordinate roles in school and in society, while the content of instruction (keeping them busy with skills work instead of real reading) tends to prevent these students from learning to read well enough to achieve more rewarding roles. It is more democratic and more effective to help such children develop phonics know-how through the same means as their more advantaged peers: namely, through extensive and joyful experiences with reading, writing, and books. (One footnote is included; 36 references are attached.) (RS)

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The Hidden Agenda of Intensive, Systematic and Extensive Phonics

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My interest in the possible hidden agenda of heavy phonics instruction was aroused over a year ago when a U. S. Senate Republican Policy Committee document on phonics was read into the Congressional Record. Titled "Illiteracy: An Incurable Disease or Education Malpractice?", this paper was in effect a rallying cry for phonics. Ostensibly drawing conclusions from the available research, the apparent author of the report, Robert W. Sweet, concluded that "The overwhelming evidence from research and classroom results indicates that the cure for the 'disease of illiteracy' is the restoration of the instructional practice of intensive, systematic phonics in every primary school in America!" (p. 13).

What, exactly, is intensive, systematic phonics? Not everyone agrees. Within the scholarly community, some phonics advocates insist that children need rich experiences with literature before being taught phonics. This comes through clearly in Marilyn Adams' original book Beginning to Read: Learning and Thinking About Print (Adams 1990a), though not--for me, at least--in the summary prepared by Stahl, Osborn, and Lehr (1990). Furthermore, though the phonics recommended by reading scholars may be intensive and systematic, it is not necessarily extensive--that is, taught at great length (e.g. Anderson et al. 1985). For example, Marilyn Adams suggests that initial sounds and basic rhymes ("onsets and rimes") may be all that we need to teach systematically or intensively (1990).

In the political arena, however, phonics seems to be defined differently. This quote from the newsletter of Phyllis Schafly's Eagle Forum seems fairly typical of the view of the religious and/or political Far Right:

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> With true phonics, the child is first taught to recognize the letters of the alphabet and then is drilled in the letter sounds--first vowels, then consonants, then consonant-vowel combinations--so that the child develops an automatic association between letters and sounds. When that is accomplished, the child is then given words, sentences, and stories to read. ("Civil Rights" 1989, p. 3)

Unfortunately, certain segments of the population listen far more attentively to the demagogery of such extremists than to any of us within the scholarly community.

And it is clear that indeed, advocacy for heavy phonics instruction is coming mostly from the Far Right. For instance, the ultra-right National Association of Christian Educators (NACE) and its action group Citizens for Excellence in Education (CEE) urge their Christian followers to insist upon the teaching of phonics in the schools (e.g. Simonds 1984)--as if the schools have not for years been teaching phonics, within basal reading programs. A publication of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank in Washington, extols phonics as "the very first tenet of the back to basics approach," which is advocated as the best approach to the illiteracy problem (Allen 1989, p. 8.) In practice, such zealots typically promote phonics-first, and/or a heavy emphasis upon phonics. And certainly there are instructional materials to accommodate their demands: witness, for example, Explode the Code, a 12-workbook phonics program; Primary Phonics, a 6-workbook program followed by More Primary Phonics (both from Educators Publishing Service), and the extensive Hooked on Phonics cassette program that we hear advertised on radio and TV. Among reading scholars, even the phonics advocates typically denounce such heavy emphasis on phonics (Kantrowitz 1991).

As I began collecting evidence of what almost amounts to a phonics conspiracy among Far Right elements, I began wondering what motivates such vehement advocacy of systematic, intensive phonics--and what motivates the most intense phonics proponents

to simultaneously denounce whole language. My colleague Ellen Brinkley will focus upon this more directly, drawing upon her research into the beliefs and concerns of the religious Far Right (Brinkley 1991).

What I would like to share briefly is my sense of the probable educational, political, and social consequences of instituting intensive, systematic phonics instruction, at least when carried out extensively: what, for simplicity, I have called HEAVY phonics instruction (treated more fully in Weaver 1990). That is, I want to address the hidden agenda of heavy phonics instruction itself, regardless of whether this is or is not a conscious agenda of those who promote phonics and more phonics. (From brief conversations, I gather that those within the scholarly community who argue for intensive, systematic phonics would share these concerns about HEAVY phonics instruction, though one can't necessarily tell that from their publications.)

The Hidden Curriculum

Much of what students learn in school is not the overt curruculum, the content that is taught, if not necessarily learned. What students learn from schooling other than the overt content is often called the "hidden curriculum." Because of its pervasiveness, the hidden curriculum may constitute more of what students learn in school than anything that is explicitly taught (e.g. Giroux 1983, pp. 42-71; Shor 1986, pp. 168-1983; Lester and Onore, pp. 9, 15-35).

The hidden curriculum includes, but is not limited to, what is learned through the very organization and structure of schools, through the way authority and power are distributed and decisions made in the classroom and the school, through the omission or inclusion of content and materials from the curriculum and the library, through the way decisions about content and curriculum are made, through the way knowledge is dispensed or learning facilitated, through the rules for behavior and the way these are

determined and enforced, through the way interpersonal conflicts and "discipline" are handled, and through the way success is measured and failure determined. To put it somewhat differently, the "hidden curriculum" resides not only in what is included and what excluded from the curriculum, but also in the means by which curriculum and school policies are determined and the way that the teaching/learning enterprise and evaluation are carried out--the how of schooling. Both of these depend significantly upon who makes these curricular and instructional decisions.

Heavy phonics instruction reflects the assumptions of a transmission model of education, and the hidden curriculum inherent in that model. Some "basics" of that model are:

1. Learning consists primarily of mastering skills and facts. Learning requires correct habit formation.

2. Teachers are expert technicians, dispensing the curriculum directly. The curriculum controls what teachers will teach and what students will learn.

3. Students are passive recipients of knowledge. They learn primarily by practicing skills taught by the teacher or the workbook, and by memorizing information.

When such assumptions implicitly guide the develoment of curriculum guides and instructional materials, control and decision-making are primarily autocratic and authoritarian. Both teachers and students are devalued and disempowered.

Clearly, these assumptions underlie phonics instruction that is both intensive and extensive. Heavy phonics instruction trains students to be passive and obedient, not to be active in their own learning. This may be one reason why such instruction appeals to businessmen and politicians who are accustomed to "top down" control. It reflects their assumptions about how the world should be run. Also, not so incidentally, such instruction contributes to maintaining the unequal distribution of money and power among different social and ethnic groups.

The mechanisms by which this occurs bear scrutiny.

Intensive Phonics and Skills for the Less Advantaged

Whether ultra-conservative forces are consciously aware of it or not, intensive skills instruction, including intensive phonics instruction, does tend to promote the traditional conservative agenda of maintaining a stratified society, through both the hidden and the overt curriculum. There is evidence that the process goes something like this:

1. Students from non-mainstream homes, typically lower socio-economic and minority children, are often judged unready for school, lacking in the experiences and therefore the skills that will ensure success--specifically, certain emergent literacy skills already developed by many mainstream children. (Shannon 1985, 1989; Giroux 1983).

2. Such students are then assigned to lower "ability" groups. In particular, there is not only a strong correlation between reading group and social class, but even some evidence that social class may itself be a strong determinant of what "ability" group children are assigned to (Rist 1970; see summary in Hamilton 1983).

3. Non-mainstream students, especially those in so-called lower ability groups or tracks, typically receive authoritarian instruction that serves to socialize them into subordinate roles. This is part of the hidden curriculum of the schools.

4. For such students, the overt curruculum--in language arts and reading, particularly--consists more of completing worksheets on isolated skills, such as phonics, than of reading and constructing meaning from connected texts.

5. Such instruction prevents these students from achieving their potential as readers. They become not only less successful as measured by standardized tests of

reading, but often less successful in reading authentic texts as well; in short, they become less effective and therefore less motivated readers.

6. Because education in our schools depends so heavily upon ability to read, these less successful readers typically are offered a less challenging education than their more advantaged mainstream counterparts. Ultimately, they tend simply to receive less education: they drop out of school.

7. Having received less or a less challenging education, such students typically must settle for lower paying, lower status jobs.

8. Thus, they in turn are likely to raise non-mainstream families, at least in economic terms. And their non-mainstream children all too often go through the same cycle.

Since the crux of the issue is the nature and the effects of such differential instruction for mainstream and non-mainstream students, we need to consider this in more detail.

Differential Reading Instruction

Keep in mind, please, that a vastly disproportionate number of non-mainstream students are assigned to lower reading groups, on the grounds that they do not have the requisite background or skills for the higher reading groups.

Significantly, the manner of instruction in lower reading groups socializes those students for subordinate roles in school and in society. In addition, the content of such instruction tends to prevent these students from learning to read well enough to achieve more rewarding roles. Both the manner and the content of instruction for students in lower reading groups contrasts significantly with the reading instruction offered those in higher reading groups--typically, the more advantaged, mainstream students.

The differential instruction afforded students considered "good" and "poor" readers is well documented in a variety of studies, as mentioned by Pinnell (Nov. 1989 Elementary School Journal) and summarized by Shannon (Oct. 1985 Language Arts) and Hillerich (Summer 1985 Michigan Reading Journal). Notice how the curriculum, both hidden and overt, differs for those labeled "good" and "poor" readers:

1. Readers in lower groups spend approximately 70-75 percent of their time in oral reading, done round robin--in trying to say the words correctly while the teacher listens and corrects. Readers in higher groups spend about 70-75 percent of their time reading silently, for meaning and enjoyment. (Allington, May 1983 Elementary SchoolJournal)

2. When readers in higher groups make a miscue ("error"), teachers typically ignore the miscue or suggest how the context may help to clarify meaning. But when readers in lower groups make a miscue, teachers typically stop them and often call attention to the letter/sound cues exclusively, or correct them immediately, giving the students in lower groups much less time to discover a lack of continuity in meaning and to correct themselves.

3. Reading lessons for lower groups are more teacher-centered, more tightly tightly monitored, and more likely to focus on literal interpretation of text rather than upon drawing inferences, analyzing, evaluating, and extending or relating to what has been read (Brophy and Good 1986, Handbook of Research on Teaching, 3rd ed.)

4. Readers in lower groups receive much more drill on isolated words than do readers in higher groups. The lower group readers are kept busy with workbooks and dittos practicing "skills" work, and they may be drilled on word lists and flash cards. The higher group readers read whole books and participate in creative ways of enhancing and expressing comprehension.

The students who seem most likely to be condemned to such authoritarian and stultifying instruction are those taught in compensatory Chapter 1 programs for the

disadvantaged, and those labeled as learning disabled. It is well documented that students in compensatory or special education programs often receive kinds of instruction that serve to perpetuate their status as labeled readers; it is also well documented that such students are often indistinguishable from others on the basis of their reading alone (Allington 1983, 1987; Allington, Struetzel, & Shake, 1986; Allington and McGill-Franzen 1989; Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Mecklenburg, & Graden 1984; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, and McGue, 1982).

It should not be surprising that such stultifying instruction prevents these students from achieving their potential as readers, since it is not the completion of skills work that demonstrably produces good readers, but rather extensive reading experiences (Anderson et al. 1985, pp. 75-76). It is no wonder, then, that for many students, being assigned to a compensatory Chapter 1 class or a special education class amounts to a life sentence (Anderson and Pellicer 1990). In Rex Brown's new book Schools of Thought (1991), he uses the example of a "successful" all-black school district to demonstrate how an exclusive focus on basic skills, even where there is strong community support for education, prevents students from aspiring to or attaining a level of achievement beyond that of their parents. The vicious cycle of exclusion from mainstream society is maintained, to a significant degree, by overemphasis on basic skills instruction, including phonics, and a concomitant underemphasis on reading for meaning and enjoyment.

Unfortunately, this vicious cycle is all too likely to be encouraged by the summary of Marilyn Adams' book, written by Stahl, Osborn, and Lehr--a summary that was cited approvingly by Far Right phonics proponents even before it was published ("Illiteracy . . ." 1989). It is clear from Adams' book itself (1990) that she advocates extensive and enriched literacy experiences first, especially for children who have not had such experiences in the home. But this does not come through clearly in the summary. The authors state,

> . . [For] children who enter school with almost no relevant knowledge of print, much of the content of the beginning reading lessons will be new in detail and concept and, as a consequence, more confusing and harder to put together [than for children who already have already had extensive exposure to books].
>
> To make sure that all necessary letter-sound pairs are learned well, teachers must see to it that [these low-readiness] students receive sufficient practice with each pair, and that they evaluate what their students are learning. (Stahl, Osborn, and Lehr, p. 74; the language is similar to that in Adams 1990, pp. 239-40)

Unfortunately, it is clear that statements such as these from the summary of Adams' book are already being used to justify intensive and extensive phonics instruction for allegedly less prepared readers (Taylor 1991). And given past practices and effects, it seems likely that such heavy phonics instruction will serve to perpetuate the non-mainstream status of many of these students: through the overt curriculum, which keeps them busy with skills work instead of real reading, and through the hidden curriculum, which socializes students for subordinate roles--in school, and in society.

Whose Interests Does Intensive, Systematic, Extensive Phonics Serve?

What, then, about heavy teaching of phonics? Whose interests does it serve? Some phonics proponents argue that "the way to closing the literacy gap between minorities and the middle class [is] by teaching phonics" (Hoerl 1988), and they generally seem to mean teaching phonics both intensively and extensively. But from the perspective sketched here, heavy phonics instruction seems to be a tool for widening rather than closing the literacy gap between non-mainstream and mainstream children, and a tool for reinforcing and perpetuating current socio-economic inequalities. Providing more intensive and more systematic phonics for the less advantaged may

contribute significantly to keeping the poor---however defined--in their place: that is, to keeping them from either entering the mainstream culture of power on its own terms (Delpit 1988), or from challenging the social order that perpetuates socio-economic inequalities (e.g. Giroux 1983).

Are members of the Far Right aware of the typical effects of promoting a heavy emphasis on phonics? I honestly don't know. But I have come to the conclusion that intensive and extensive phonics instruction <u>can</u> be a weapon--concealed or not--that further oppresses those already less advantaged. It seems not only more effective but more democratic to help such children develop phonics know-how through the same means as their more advantaged peers: namely, through extensive and joyful experiences with reading, writing, and books. (1)

Footnote

1. I am mindful of the concern expressed by Lisa Delpit, that lower class children of color, as she puts it, are generally accustomed to authoritarianism in the home, not to the more democratic patterns of interaction often found in middle class homes and in whole language classrooms. There is no doubt that this mismatch between authoritarian homes and democratic whole language classrooms can cause problems, both at home and at school (Harman and Edelsky 1989, Delpit 1988, 1986). On the other hand, Delpit also points out that students from non-mainstream cultures must be taught the codes and the culture of power needed to participate fully in mainstream life. And mainstream culture, even in the marketplace, does not operate exclusively through hierarchically organized authority. Indeed, the business world is increasingly characterized by a culture of shared responsibility and decision-making, much like that fostered in whole language classrooms (Peters 1987; Kouzes and Posner 1988). Thus the culture of whole language classrooms is more and more the kind of culture into which students need to be socialized, if they are to succeed in corporate America. To deny students experience in this culture may lessen their chances of becoming part of the culture of power, as Delpit desires.

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